New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1955

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"No Time for Sergeants"
"A Roomful of Roses"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 24, 1955*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"No Time for Sergeants"

New York Post

October 21, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Engaging Fun About the Air Force

Although it is rather ramshackle in its structure, there is so much laughter in "No Time for Sergeants," and it is so winningly played by a newcomer named Andy Griffith in the leading role, that there's little reason to bother over its being a series of hilarious cartoons rather than a play.

Based on a novel by Mac Hyman, the new comedy by Ira Levin, which opened last night at the Alvin Theater, is an almost consistently hilarious joke at the expense of the U. S. Air Force, and its gift for uproarious lampooning is matched only by its genial good nature.

Its pattern is a classic one. Take a simple and lovable innocent, guileless, gullible and without malice, and place him in juxtaposition to the pompous earnestness of military discipline and bureaucracy, and you have the springboard for mockery that can be both devastating and heart-warming. The perfect example was a Czech novel of the First World War called "The Good Soldier Schweik." Possibly "No Time for Sergeants" could be described as an American version of the Czech novel with a hero bearing a not-too-distant kinship with Al Capp's Li'l Abner.

The Hillbilly

For its central figure is a husky and good-natured hillbilly, who finally gets into the Air Force despite his father's propensity for tearing up his draft papers. The devastation he creates among generals and sergeants, as well as among his fellow service men and, in particular, a military psychiatrist, is the subject of the dramatized cartoon. There isn't much plot; just a series of comic sketches, most of them excellent. If there is a narrative thread that holds things together it is based on the determination of the hero and his pal to get transferred to the infantry.

The first half deals with the desperate efforts of the Air Force to classify this highly unclassifiable mountain boy. I think it reaches its high point in his vanquishment of the frustrated psychiatrist. The second half sends our hero off in a an airplane manned by some weary flying officers, most of them suffering from hangovers. It is an enormously comic voyage, even though the plane does get lost and finds itself heading towards an atomic explosion in Yucca Flats. The episode even includes the descent of the boy and his pal in a parachute.

Causes of Success

There happens to be a good deal of story in addition to all this, but I won't bother you with it for two reasons. One is that it isn't the important part of the evening. The other is that I wasn't always able to follow it. What makes the success of "No Time for Sergeants" is that its central character is so engaging and his adventures, whether exactly clear or not, are so consistently funny. There are very few moments when hilarious things aren't taking place, and there is the additional factor that you find yourself always pulling for its endearing hero.

It would be difficult to imagine a more engagingly comic figure than Mr. Griffith, a gangling, pleasant-looking and quietly humorous actor, makes of this Will Stockdale. There is a quality of naive sweetness that he brings to the role which is as appealing as it is brilliantly funny. Roddy McDowall, as the pal who longs to be an infantryman, is also of great assistance to the proceedings, as is the unfailingly competent Myron McCormick as the long-suffering sergeant. The two most harried officers are well-played by Howard Freeman and Royal Beal. Morton DaCosta's brisk staging and Peter Larkin's sets help provide an evening of unrestrained fun.

"NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS"

Play by Ira Levin; based on the novel by Mac Hyman; staged by Morton Da Costa; sets by Peter Larkin; costumes by Noel Taylor; lighting by Peggy Clark; presented by Maurice Evans in association with Emmett Rogers at the Alvin Theatre, October 20, 1955. The cast:

Preacher.....Don Knotts
Will Stockdale....Andy Griffith
Pa Stockdale.....Floyd Buckley
Draft Man....O. Tolbert-Hewitt
Bus Driver.....Michael Thoma
Irvin Blanchard..Robert Webber
Rosabelle.....Maree Dow
Ben Whitledge..Roddy McDowall
Sergeant King..Myron McCormick
A Captain.....Ed Peck
Classification Corporal.....
Ray Johnson
A Lieutenant.....Earle Hyman
A Psychiatrist..James Millhollin
An Infantryman..Arthur P. Keegan
Air Force Policeman..Jules Racine
A Colonel.....Rex Everhart
Lt. Bridges.....Hazen Gifford
Lt. Gardella.....Carl Albertson
Lt. Kendall...Cecil Rutherford
Lt. Cover.....Bill Hinnant
Gen. Bush....Howard Freeman
Gen. Pollard.....Royal Beal
Lt. Baker....Edmund Johnston
Capt. Charles.....Wynn Pearce

DAILY NEWS

October 21, 1955

'No Time for Sergeants' Is Great Time for Audiences from Now On

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Mac Hyman's novel, "No Time for Sergeants," is a Southern-fried tale about a modern Huckleberry Finn who gets drafted into the army. The warmth of its characters, the deliberate ludicrousness of its situations and its sharp, quick and homely humor derives, I think, from Mark Twain. Now Ira Levin has made a play from this novel and Maurice Evans presented it last evening at the Alvin Theatre. Last evening was one of the happiest times I ever spent in any theatre—including the Alvin, where another play about men at war, "Mister Roberts," had a memorable premiere a few years ago. The stage version of "No Time for Sergeants" is superb.

After the curtain fell last evening and rose again to give members of the cast their bows, an unusual thing happened. The cast, very large and including seasoned comedians like Myron McCormick, Howard Freeman and Royal Beal, began applauding another member of the company, Andy Griffith. I don't think this was fake applause; it was an honest tribute to a young actor whom nobody had ever heard of before this play—and a more engaging fellow would be hard to find.

Andy Griffith is the Huckleberry Finn of the comedy—a Southern hillbilly who gets drafted and practically wrecks the entire United States Army simply by being friendly and willing. He deems it an honor to be named Permanent Latrine Orderly by his suffering sergeant, Mr. McCormick, and he fixes the latrine as no other orderly ever did it. When a captain and a colonel arrive to make an inspection, even the long row of toilet seats snaps up to attention with a bang.

Sergeant Goes Too

The army adventures of Andy Griffith are shared by a skinny little fellow, Roddy McDowall. The draft, with its great impersonality and lack of judgment, has thrown these two together and made them buddies. They have been assigned to the Air Force and they yearn to be in the infantry—a silly idea, right off — because Roddy's great-grandfather fought in the infantry in the War Between the States.

Well, in "No Time for Sergeants" the boys finally make the infantry, and they take their suffering sergeant along with them. Their progress from the Air Force down to the infantry is marked by a series of disasters which left me limp from laughter, including a bomber crash in which the two heroes are presumed dead and given posthumous decorations. But not all the U. S. generals could kill off a pair like Griffith and McDowall, so the boys attend their own military wake and then demand the decorations anyhow.

There is no truth whatever in the plot as a plot, but there is a great deal of truth in the characters. Griffith is nothing short of wonderful, and the whole cast, directed by Morton da Costa, is nothing short of Griffith. This is a cockeyed view of army life, but a sound one.

Another genius of "No Time for Sergeants" is Peter Larkin, the scene designer. Without too much fuss, Larkin arranges for scenes to skip all over an army barracks, from offices to latrines, and then to take the audience aloft in a bomber manned by student officers with hangovers. He even arranges for Griffith and McDowall to escape a crash by parachute and have a nice conversation coming down. His settings are pure and admirable show business—and they decorate an immensely funny play.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 21, 1955

THEATER

'No Time for Sergeants'

By WALTER F. KERR

IN THE last lunatic scene of "No Time for Sergeants" a whole passel of air force top brass meet furtively at midnight in an old deserted wood for the purpose of bestowing a couple of borrowed medals on two yokels who have outwitted the Army's intelligence experts, confounded the Army's psychiatrists, and finally succeeded in driving an unwelcome aeroplane smack into the testing tower of a bomb site in Colorado.

As a matter of fact, things have been going on like that all night. "No Time for Sergeants" is not so much a play as a prank. But it is a prank that keeps a big sheepish grin on its face from antic beginning to idiot end, and I think a lot of medals can be passed out this morning.

Number One would probably go to designer Peter Larkin, who has looked into Ira Levin's multi-scened script and emerged undaunted. The evening's festivities call for an early-dawn crawl into the underside of an aeroplane, a cloud-borne journey into what may be intended as an atomic explosion, several sojourns into what are described as the country's shinjest latrines, and endless scurryings into endless official cubbyholes.

To pack all of this into one regulation-size Broadway theater, Mr. Larkin has simply animated his stage with the free hand and the giddy inspiration of a rejuvenated Walt Disney. Doors slip away without warning, statues glide into the evening sky, every inch of the acting area gets up and goes where it wants to. The stage itself seems to share the joke, winking at us amiably as it turns inside out.

Medal Number Two is for Andy Griffith, who first drawled out his performance of cheerful, helpful, illiterate Will Stockdale in a television version of the Mac Hyman novel. Now Mr. Griffith has been given a whole evening to duck his head shyly, shuffle sideways, and innocently destroy the United States Air Force. He does it as pleasantly and as decently as possible, downing a schooner of Scotch with the manners of a gentleman, tearing up gas pumps in an excess of friendliness, toppling his superiors like a row of dominoes whenever a comrade needs a little assistance. In what might easily have been a conventional hayseed bit, Mr. Griffith is fresh, absurdly plausible, and witlessly winning.

A further citation is due Myron McCormick for taking that harassed Sergeant we've seen all our lives and turning him into a brand-new, spectacularly funny foil for the undergraduate clowns. The moment a roving spotlight picks up Mr. McCormick—one eye a little bigger than the other, one cheek a little puffier than the other, each word riding precariously upward on an impending belch—the audience is simply his for the asking. This bilious performer now has something like absolute authority, and it doesn't much matter whether he's feeding a recruit carrots to get him through an eye test or slipping on a pair of fur-lined bedroom slippers for an evening of rest—everything he does is funny two seconds before he does it.

The nonsense is kept spinning by an enormous company, all of whom fit precisely into director Morton da Costa's diabolical master-plan. Roddy McDowell adjusts his spectacles and honorably demands that the Army throw the book at him with an edifying, and sometimes hilarious, nobility. Royal Beal and Howard Freeman pant, snort, and roar majestically as a couple of baffled officers, and Robert Webber, Earle Hyman, and O. Tolbert-Hewitt add to the heartening confusion.

Since "No Time for Sergeants" is only a simple and swift cartoon, it doesn't bring along much ballast. Once in awhile it threatens to disappear into the wings altogether, and it's rather a pity that there isn't a thread of sense or sentiment to stitch it together more tightly: Mr. Griffith shows signs of being able to manage that sort of thing, too. But let's not ask for everything. As a piece of uncomplicated and patently outrageous buffoonery, "No Time for Sergeants" is a blockbuster.

The New York Times
October 21, 1955

Theatre: Draftee Conquers Army

Alvin Premiere for 'No Time for Sergeants'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SOME time ago an amiable Southern writer had a unique idea. It occurred to him to write a book—fiction, of course—about an American boy who did not object to being drafted.

That was the genesis of Mac Hyman's novel, "No Time for Sergeants," which has become a part of current culture. The novel, in turn, is the genesis of Ira Levin's comedy with the same title. It opened to a glow of general satisfaction at the Alvin last evening.

For the idea is irresistible. It undermines the whole nature of American life. It amounts to nonviolent resistance or to peaceful penetration, whichever way you choose to look at it. When Will Stockdale goes into the military service willingly and treats sergeants and officers like friends, the structure of military life is shaken to the fourth and fifth echelons. Although Will survives, the Air Force and the infantry go to pieces.

The quality that the military forces cannot cope with is Will's decency. There is nothing in the regulations that applies to the problem Will raises wherever he goes with a smile on his face and good nature in his heart. Fortunately, the author and the producers of the comedy have found the ideal man to play the part of Will Stockdale on the stage. He is Andy Griffith, a tall, folksy Southerner with a shining face, a wide smile, curly hair, a sweet accent and a general glow of friendliness and native hospitality.

Mr. Griffith does not have to condescend to Will Stockdale. All he has to do is walk on the stage and look the audience straight in the face. If the armed forces cannot cope with Will Stockdale, neither can the audience resist Andy Griffith.

Naturally, the comedy has to omit some of the hilarious scenes that keep turning up in the novel. But Mr. Levin has done a pleasant job by presenting some of the episodes almost literally, and by treating the theatre more and more like the proper medium for burlesque. The humor is broad to begin with when the draft agent digs Will out of the woods and ships him off to camp under the leadership of a mean R. O. T. C. graduate.

But it goes from broad to fabulous in the second act when Will and his chum, Ben, fly up into the wild blue yonder with a drunken crew. Peter Larkin's scenery is amusingly eccentric in the first act. But his second-act scenery showing an airplane getting off the ground, and then the interior of the airplane cruising through the sky, is in the style of old-fashioned theatre spectacles — supernatural and gaudy, sound effects and all the mumbo-jumbo of the trade. It is vastly enjoyable because it illustrates and augments the cartoon-like quality of the story.

The record might as well show that "No Time for Sergeants" is more uproarious in the first act than the second. When the cock-eyed saga of Will and Ben involves two generals on the ground in two widely separated places, and when Will and Ben receive posthumous medals for something they never did, the lampoon begins to get out of hand. In his direction of the last scenes in a general's office and later in the woods, perhaps Morton Da Costa can still sharpen the low comedy satire. Howard Freeman and Royal Beal as the two desperate generals trying to ride the whirlwind are not so funny as the circumstances seem to warrant.

But it is so only because everything else in "No Time for Sergeants" is so resoundingly comic. Who is Sergeant King, the first military representative whom Will Stockdale encounters? Myron McCormick, naturally. Back in uniform, swagger and worried at the same time, full of unfathomable military anguish, Mr. McCormick gives another capital performance.

As Ben, the earnest Southerner with a proud military family tradition, Roddy McDowall is the perfect foil—confused but loyal and high-spirited. There is a wonderful scene with James Millhollin, as the army psychiatrist who tries his professional jargon on Will and retreats defeated. Robert Webber is excellent as the slick, sinister operator from the R. O. T. C. That eminent Shakespearean actor, Earle Hyman, turns up as a swanky officer—a part he plays with amusing elegance.

On the whole, "No Time for Sergeants" is a fine chip off the Mac Hyman novel. The comedy is ludicrous, intimate and refreshing. The struggle between Will Stockdale's simplicity and the rigid civilization of the armed forces is enormously entertaining. It's a wonderful bit of folklore out of modern times.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 21, 1955

For Sergeants? No, for Laughter

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Laughter like thunder will shake the Alvin Theater for a long time to come. A wild cartoon about military life called "No Time for Sergeants" opened last night. At the end, people walked out holding their sides, still gasping.

The new show is a satire on life in Air Force training. It sets out from the laughable premise that a couple of raw country boys would rather be in the infantry than fly planes.

The big joke is that they can't make it. In the end they only manage, by blithely defying an atom bomb and scaring the medals off all the generals in sight.

Strictly Prefab.

It is a prefab job, neatly dovetailed, with every joke planted and reaped to a split-second count.

Among its many highly pleasant awards to the public is the local debut of one Andy Griffith, as starry a leading man as the theater has. The play is done as a flashback from a monologue this mountain feller is giving about his adventures.

Griffith moves back and forth from his speech to what actually and outlandishly happened, with the most ingratiating toughness, simplicity and sweetness imaginable.

Guileless but Grand.

He is a tower of strength, and a well of innocence. The slightest guile escapes him, and his cheery horse sense sends the entire Air Force into mental disarray.

As soon as he is signed up, Griffith makes a buddy of Roddy McDowall, a perfect choice for the intent, skinny private who wants to follow his many brothers into the infantry.

He points out that the Air Force may throw bombs, but they throw them ON the infantry.

Sometimes in command of them, more often trailing their bland escapades, and always outdone, is Myron McCormick as the Sergeant.

He is majestically stony in his bafflement, as McDowall is waspish with determination, and Griffith is superbly above practical hazards.

Off Into the Wild Blue.

The play winds its uproarious course through induction, and devotes most of its second half to one of the maddest flights ever recorded. A group of dozing officers lets an automatic pilot soar them into the middle of Yucca Flats.

If there is a lack in this wildly funny evening, it is that the comedy seems ashamed of admitting it has a heart. The devotion of the men toward each other is right there, but nobody ever mentions it. Nor does the narrative ever turn on anything but a mad new flight of fancy.

The show's warmth comes mainly from the endearing, generous, plain character Griffith paints. On his tongue, things are "thangs," and draft is "dreyeft," and where you might say "beat him up," this one says "whomp him good." He is country, alright, and backwoods, and pure gold.

The production is intricate, inventive, neat and fluid, and the direction keeps a smart cast firing the laughs like cannonballs.

Journal-American

October 21, 1955

Hail Play of a GI Who Irks General

Maurice Evans Shows His Genius In Selection of Andy Griffith

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT TOOK true imagination, and no little courage, to consign the leading role in a large Broadway production to a young man whose previous experience had been confined to making folksy Southern-type recordings, with an occasional hitch as a night club monologist.

But Maurice Evans, who has been making a monkey out of Midas lately, chose to hand him the biggest part in "No Time For Sergeants," the Ira Levin adaptation of Mac Hyman's best selling novel—and as a result Andy Griffith will undoubtedly emerge a star.

For this is a field day for this engaging, tousle-headed Southerner with an accent stronger than sour mash. From the moment he comes out alone to tell the audience how he won his medal in the Air Corps until he advises the customers to go home, a couple of hours later, he dominates the proceedings. His bland innocence, his baffling naivete, bowls over sergeants, captains and generals and the book of regulations; when they devised the rules they didn't figure on him. Now he's bigger than all of them.

The play, which is a quite literal translation of the book, tells the story of a Georgia cracker plucked out of the hills and suddenly inducted into the Army. His inherent honesty and blind devotion to the literal meaning of the word lead him through a series of convolutions resulting in his admission to the Air Force and thence through more gyrations, involving a couple of generals, culminating in full hero status.

Griffith maintains the hilarious tempo beginning the minute he throws his lip over the first soft "r"; and he is aided by excellent material and faultless support. An innocent abroad in any branch of the military service has always been a fertile field for laughs, and this is notably one which has no relation to the shootin' war. This is the tale of the drudgery and doldrums of peacetime service.

A large measure of credit should be directed toward the production. It would have been impossible to tell this story properly without an enormous number of sets, but somehow Peter Larkin has managed by the use of drops, slides and insets to take us from a barracks to a night club, to the inside of a plane, to an underground "A" bomb installation, to a rendezvous in the woods, without any appreciable effort or time lag. In these days of one-set shows, this is a pleasant and rewarding diversion.

In the large cast Roddy MacDowall is a stand-out as Ben Whiteledge, Griffith's buddy. Myron McCormick, finally rid of his Navy uniform after all those years in "South Pacific," is back in Air Force sergeant stripes and, with the advance in rank, gives a somewhat more forceful but no less ingratiating performance. Howard Freeman is a wonderfully bewildered general; Robert Webber is effective as the local bully with the R.O.T.C. background, and Royal Beal is another general (infantry) who shares the common complaint of being unable to cope with Pvt. Stockdale.

This should be a big success. It has been directed by Morton Da Costa with tremendous pace and punch, and there is scarcely a breather between laughs. I think Mr. Griffith can move out of the hotel and take a lease on an apartment.

Daily Mirror

October 21, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Sergeants' Rating: Hilarity Hurricane

A couple of seasons ago, Maurice Evans and George Schaefer brought a laugh champ to town called "The Teahouse of the August Moon." Now, Evans, in association with Emmett Rogers, has given us another comedy smash called "No Time for Sergeants." It should pack the Alvin Theatre for months and years.

The new arrival was penned by Ira Levin from a novel by Mac Hyman. It tells of the scrapes that an amiable draftee from the backwoods of Georgia gets into and out of in the Air Force. He drives his superiors nuts, yet they can't help liking him.

YOU'LL FIND NOTHING funnier the length of Broadway than Private Will Stockdale putting a psychiatrist into a lather, trying to operate a bomber's radio or making a couple of generals doubt their own sanity. The howls come so fast and furiously as to exhaust your chuckle apparatus.

Evans has popped up with the find of the season in Andy Griffith. This North Carolinian, making his Main Stem stage debut, is terrific. The perfect Private Stockdale. Before the second act could get under way, the first-nighters burst into an ovation for him that lasted for several minutes — something that we donn't recall having seen before.

Roddy McDowell is wonderful as an earnest and not overly bright buddy, as is Myron McCormick as a harassed top-kick. Salutes are also due Howard Freeman, Royal Beal, Robert Webber, Floyd Buckley, Earle Hyman, James Millhollin, Hazen Gifford, Carl Albertson, Cecil Rutherford and Bill Hinnant.

IN FACT, the entire cast merits a bow from the waist. It gives a rousing performance under the direction of Morton Da Costa. In ingenious settings by Peter Larkin.

Take our advice, and rush to the Alvin for your tickets. Otherwise, you're going to have to wait a long time to get them. For "No Time for Sergeants" is a tremendously funny frolic. A hurricane of hilarity, calculated to wreck your ribs.

Add Evans to the list of pros who have hit a home-run every time at bat. The Alvin's new tenant is a big-time four-bagger if we've ever seen one. You can't afford to miss it.

"A Roomful of Roses"

New York Herald Tribune

October 18, 1955

THEATER

'A Roomful of Roses'

By WALTER F. KERR

I THINK the trouble with the people in the new piece at the Playhouse is that they're just too understanding. Edith Sommer has worked out a little suburban social study having to do with the emotional inhibitions that beset a fifteen-year-old daughter of divorced parents, and somehow or other she has drawn the principal characters so that they precisely match the cool glass, brick and stone of the living room they inhabit.

These figures are, one and all, tastefully compassionate. They clasp their hands firmly before them as they sit on impeccably modern furniture. They stare intently at one another, their eyes filled with alarm and wisdom and sympathetic yearning. They lift their fingers in the gesture of "no-no," they turn their backs to hide their tears, and they smile a little helplessly as things get beyond them.

• • •

But they find it terribly difficult to say anything direct, open, or unmistakably honest. They live, you see, in a pretty magazine illustration for which all the captions—"My baby's coming," "She needs me," "I was never so glad to see any one in my life"—have been discreetly, mathematically tooled.

Nancy Fallon has, some eight years back, run off with a foreign correspondent, leaving a seven-year-old daughter at the mercy of an unloving father. The bitter father has been at work on the child these long years past. Now he is thinking of marrying again, and Bridget is temporarily shipped off to her mother.

When Bridget comes, she is a chillingly defensive, arrogantly independent customer. She has been taught that it is most unsophisticated to mention one parent in the presence of the other, she is sure that it is unwise ever to love any one, and she is eating her heart out in her defiant loneliness. Mother and a whole houseful of handy neighbors realize at once that something must be done.

That Miss Sommer has put her finger on a perfectly real psychological problem is, I think, clear. That she has sweetened it, overdecorated it, and—at the end—ducked it is pretty clear, too. When it is time for the girl to be jolted out of her ironclad fortress, the miracle is accomplished by the arrival of one of those "Junior Miss" party dresses—a mountain of pink fluff that may very well symbolize the play.

When it is necessary to complicate the poor thing's life anew, a comic contrivance of Booth Tarkington vintage—a boy can't take her to a dance because the lass who holds his signet ring has turned up from out of town—is hurled into the breach and worked for all the irrelevant pathos it is worth. (Cheating, that's what this is.) And if we are to take the whole troubled story as a serious comment, we are faced with a peculiar solution: in effect, the child learns to love her mother by learning to despise her father. Is this good therapeutic practice nowadays?

• • •

It must be said that the curiously unmoving dress-parade at the Playhouse is in every sense gracefully managed. The author is adroit in moving family and friends through the Midlothian (Illinois) homestead. Donald Oenslager has made the homestead itself a model of interior decoration. Guthrie McClintic has directed with absolute polish.

And Patricia Neal would grace the cover of any magazine you care to name. "I suppose it's the large bones," muses a friend of the family in an effort to describe the "splendid innocence" that clings to this earnest mother. Miss Neal's bones are indeed magnificent, her resonant voice is a pleasure to listen to, and the performance itself is impeccably wrought. Betty Lou Keim is the unlucky Bridget who has served as her father's pawn, and she is pretty and appealing when the script isn't insisting that she behave intolerably. Warren Berlinger is perfect as a teen-

"A ROOMFUL OF ROSES"

Play by Edith Sommer; staged by Guthrie McClintic; setting and lighting by Donald Oenslager; costumes by Audre; presented by Mr. McClintic and Stanley Gilkey at the Playhouse Theatre, October 17, 1955. The cast:

Willamay.....Lulu B. King
Larry Fallon...Darryl Richard
Nancy Fallon.....Patricia Neal
Grace Hewitt.....Alice Frost
Jane Hewitt.....Ann Whiteside
Dick Hewitt..Warren Berlinger
Jay Fallon.....Russ Conway
Bridget Macgowan.....
Betty Lou Keim
Carl Macgowan....David White

Daily Mirror
October 18, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Familiar Themes In 'A Roomful of Roses'

• Deals with effect of divorce on children and with making adolescents thoughtful.

In "A Roomful of Roses," which Guthrie McClintic and Stanley Gilkey brought to the Playhouse Monday evening, Edith Sommer is dealing with a couple of familiar themes: the effect of divorce on children and how to make willful adolescents more thoughtful of their elders.

IN THIS INSTANCE an oversized stuffed-shirt has gotten possession of his seven-year-old daughter, and uses her over the years to hurt her mother. In doing so, he has hurt the youngster. Money and fancy boarding schools haven't compensated for affection and understanding.

The ruthless big-shot sends the girl—by now 15—to visit his ex-wife, so that he can marry a new flame in her absence. Though he has held up the mother as an awful example of infidelity and selfishness, he himself hasn't been averse to playing around. The lonely miss is a spoiled one, smug and wise beyond her years.

Well, you know the ending as well as we do. Surrounded by kids her own age, who meet her half-way but won't take any guff from her, she becomes a real person and decides to remain with the mother and stepfather, who have given her sympathy and affection, and helped her work out her problems.

"A ROOMFUL OF Roses" under co-producer McClintic's direction, has a goodly quota of touching and hilarious moments. But we left the Playhouse with the feeling that it is a bit on the thin side. Under-writing has made the motivations sketchy and the youngster's awakening too abrupt to be entirely convincing.

Patricia Neal, too long absent from Broadway, brings a glowing warmth to the mother who succeeds in re-claiming her daughter from arrogant despair. Betty Lou Keim is rightly obnoxious as that daughter, who has to learn from experience to see both sides of a case. Russ Conway is real and likable as the decent and patient stepfather.

Warren Berlinger, who reminds us just a little of the young Mickey Rooney, is appealing as a juvenile romantic, torn between a girl nearby and another in Arkansas. David White, a reliable actor, is forced to be too stilted and unreal, through the writing and direction, to seem quite unbelievable.

SALUTES ARE due Alice Frost, Darryl Richard, Lulu B. King and Ann Whiteside.

Donald Oenslager has designed a pleasant medium-sized city living-room. In the suburbs, of course, for there is a golf course adjacent. And, with all due respect to Prof. Oenslager of Yale, the exterior is much too brightly lighted.

Since "A Roomful of Roses" deals with elementals — and rather skillfully, too—it has a certain elementary charm and fascination. And it boasts lusty and obvious laughs. So obvious that many of the first-nighters were anticipating them with guffaws. Even before the punch lines came.

In sum, "A Roomful of Roses" has its rewards. But they are insufficient, in our opinion, for a full evening's entertainment. And entertainment it is. Because the depth necessary for something better is lacking. Sorry.

The New York Times
October 18, 1955

Theatre: 'A Roomful of Roses' Opens at Playhouse

Play by Edith Sommer Merits Bouquets

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IN the textbooks, Edith Sommer's "A Roomful of Roses," acted at the Playhouse last evening, might be classified as a problem play.

But since Miss Sommer has written it with humanity and since the acting is winning, let's refer to it as an affecting drama about likable people who absorb the problem into their daily lives. Although Patricia Neal is starred and gives a glowing performance, the central character is a teen-age girl. Bridget Macgowan is the daughter of divorced parents. For a decade or so she has been living with her father.

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When the play opens, she is coming to visit her mother in Illinois for the first time since the divorce fracas. Her cool civilities show that she despises her mother. But presently it appears that she does not feel much closer to her father. There are a number of side issues that bear on the subtle changes in the relationships of the Illinois family when the child of the first marriage comes into the home.

But the chief focus of the play is on Bridget's distrust of the adult world and her lonely spirit. This is the sort of thing that could be ticked off glibly in psychoanalytic jargon by the amateur head-shrinkers who dominate intellectual society today. But Miss Sommer has had the grace to treat Bridget like a person, and Betty Lou Keim has the talent and skill to play the part with heart-breaking directness. Between them they have rescued "A Roomful of Roses" from commonplaceness and made it into a moving play.

Not to forget the humor: some of the scenes are very funny. For the characters include Bridget's half-brother, whom she is meeting for the first time, and an adolescent boy and girl from next door. Aren't there any untalented juvenile actors anymore? There are none in "A Roomful of Roses." Ann Whiteside as the frank and unkempt girl next door, Warren Berlinger as her incompletely sophisticated brother and Darryl Richard as the brat who gets slapped by everybody but knows how to defend himself—all give enjoyable performances. The most amusing scenes are those in which the adolescents take over the play.

Under Guthrie McClintic's agreeable direction all the actors make the most of an interesting script. Miss Neal gives her best performance to date as the troubled mother. It is relaxed in style without losing emotional force, and it puts a solid foundation under the drama.

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Alice Frost is highly entertaining as the garrulous busybody next door. As Bridget's Illinois stepfather, Russ Conway is excellent. David White manages to play the querulous first husband well enough to set the audience's dentures on edge. There is likely to be a maternal maid in the first scene and also in later scenes in a homely play of this sort. Lulu B. King acquits herself ably.

Given the task of designing a modern living room for a respectable middle-class family, Donald Oenslager makes real estate uncommonly inviting. In that respect, he reflects the tone of the script. For Miss Sommer has written an attractive play about decent people who have good instincts. That in itself must be recognized as a novelty.

Betty Lou Keim and Patricia Neal Praised

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

October 18, 1955

'A Roomful of Roses' a Playful Of Poses, All Highly Theatrical

By JOHN CHAPMAN

It could be that last night's production of "A Roomful of Roses" at the Playhouse was historic. The play is beautifully mounted, excellently acted and intelligently directed, and its story threw the first-nighters into raptures of attention. This thing could capture great popularity as the first detergent opera, more modern, less sudsy and not so hard to rinse as the old-style soap opera.

Do not think I am cynical reporting this. The play, by Edith Sommer, is well-made enough to be the product of a ready-mix typewriter. The cast, including Patricia Neal—a Junior Mrs. version of Katharine Cornell—and Betty Lou Keim as her junior miss daughter, is admirable throughout. The story, about a girl who needs love because her parents are divorced, is sure to twang the heartstrings of all still-married parents. "A Roomful of Roses" has all the ingredients of a three-year Broadway run, and it must be my fault that it made me a little sick to the stummick.

Nobody Loves Her

Young Miss Keim, in the play, is 15 or 16 and she has come to visit her mother, Miss Neal, after an absence of about eight years because her father has had custody since the divorce. Miss Keim sports a haughty air and a palomino hairdo. She won't make friends with nobody. She explains to her mother on this visit why she is such an impossible little twerp, and her philosophy is based on her being the child of a sundered twain: "If somebody likes you, you mustn't like them back. You lose them."

Well, you know what happens. During the course of "A Roomful of Roses" the spirit of this fine and independent little girl is broken—by love. Before the end of the play she has become all soft and slobbery and affectionate and normal.

Well Directed

Miss Keim handles her assignment very well, and so does Miss Neal as her mother. There are some youngsters in the company, for this is a drama about the children and what we should do about them, and they are amusingly played by Darryl Richard, Ann Whiteside and Warren Berlinger. Other grownups include Alice Frost, Russ Conway and David White.

Guthrie McClintic, with extreme skill, has directed "A Roomful of Roses" as if it really happened, and this is what I call true devotion to the theatre. Donald Oenslager's setting, of a living room in a house in Midlothian, Ill., is a rather splendid thing of brick walls and vistas and stairways, and Frank Lloyd Wright better watch his step—or steps.

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NEW YORK

October 18, 1955

Story Told With Taste

Excellent Cast and Direction Gives Force to Comedy-Drama

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT APPEARS THAT a young mother has run away from a torpid husband and found happiness with one who loves her dearly, but in so doing she has lost custody of her small daughter. Now, some eight years later, she is about to be re-united with the offspring, aged fifteen, for a period of a few weeks.

She fiercely hopes to rekindle some maternal love in the girl, to induce her to remain with her; these are the elements that form the background for "A Roomful of Roses," a new play by Edith Sommer which was presented by Guthrie McClintic and Stanley Gilkey at the Playhouse last night.

This is a thoughtfully-written and extremely well acted comedy-drama. It is a challenge to keep this single problem alive through an entire evening, and while it falters at moments, the author is able to strike back, either through good comedy or pathos, and the end result is gratifying. It has the universal appeal of motherhood, and the loneliness of youth; it also has the incomparable boy comic, the busy-body next door neighbor, even the loyal Negro domestic. I don't see how it can miss.

"Roomful" is one of those plays employing a plot about which there can not be the slightest doubt from the outcome, so that the only chance for success lies in how skilfully it is told. We must be surprised and amused along the route, even though we know the destination, and I, for one, was. More than that, I was moved.

Much of the credit for this lies in the immaculate casting and direction of Mr. McClintic, Betty Lou Keim, no newcomer, she—is handed one of the most demanding roles of the season as the daughter. She comes upon us as a spoiled and affected brat and remains to tear our hearts out. We seem to be having more than our share of young lady luminaries this fall and Miss Keim must be added to the line-up.

When she is not twanging on the heart strings there is Alice Frost, the neighbor who always arrives at the wrong moment. This is by no means a new switch in playwright, or any other writing, but Miss Frost gets enough out of the lines to remove the onus and lead us into raucous laughter. And as her teen-age son, there is Warren Berlinger, that masterful young sophisticate, who once more confronts us with the monstrous complexities of adolescence. In the role of his sister Ann Whiteside, making her debut, is a truly hilarious model of the forthright bobby-soxer.

Sheer Charm

Patricia Neal, the star, confronted with this monstrous array of young scene-stealers, still manages to persevere through sheer force of charm and exceptional talent, dominating the evening. She is admirably abetted by Russ Conway, as her second husband and David White, as her first.

By no means least there is Darryl Richard, playing Miss Neal's son by her second marriage, crashing in and out of the premises with snakes and other attractive youthful impedimenta and taking all eyes off the older actors. Even Miss Keim couldn't handle this fabulous young bandit.

Donald Oenslager has designed a brilliant modern living room in a mid-Western suburb; Audre, the costumer, has clothed the youth in the fantastically informal uniforms of the day.

Miss Sommer's new play is about attractive people, and it is told with intelligence, taste and a fine sense of the ridiculous in all age brackets. You'll like it.